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AUTHOR Moss, Peter
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ABSTRACT

Teachers actively engaged in responding to their students' written narratives should be mindful of the many influences on their students' writing, including the abuses of the language by government bureaucracies and the media. Examples of these abuses are (1) the lack of density and direction or purpose in bureaucratic writing, (2) the disjointed, stream-of-consciousness writing in much news reporting, and (3) the manipulation of reality and endless repetition of trivia by the "24-hour drama" of the electronic media. The personal drama and tensions of students' experiences also affect their written narratives, and teachers must be willing to accept the despair and ugliness that often appear in student writing, particularly in that of older adolescents. Written narrative allows young writers to uncover personal voices that might say clearly who they are and to discover who they can become in the context of their community. (AEA)

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PAPER DELIVERED AT INAUGURAL CONFERENCE

OF THE NEW ZEALAND ASSOCIATION

OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

PETER MOSS

WELLINGTON. MAY 1981

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I don't know about New Zealand but in Australia I get a very clear sense that what takes place in English lessons, when not bedevilled by formal constraints of things like public examinations, lacks a dynamic centre. There's plenty of interesting and exciting work going on but it seems to lack internal coherence and, worse, any energising impulse which can take the work achieved outside the classroom walls. I think that the reason for this is that for the past ten years we've been re-learning our professional task. The tensions involved still haven't relaxed and though we are not totally free of the grey and sour zeal of the university view of what English is we have come some way towards educating our masters. Our weapons have, broadly, been of two kinds:

1. An increased and deeper interest in a range of student writing.
2. A refinement in the ways of looking at student writing - tools in methods of analysis.

Another way of putting this is that we've been making critical re-appraisals of stereotypes and in that sense we've been part of general western cultural movements of the past 20 years.

I'm not going to detail the major attitudes towards student writing but it is worth briefly summarising the two main traditions because they have informed and will continue to influence writing practice.* For obvious reasons, I term them the American and the British traditions. The American one represents close, sifting analysis put into practice by sequential exercises and modelling; it is thorough to the point of bringing on a fit of imaginative sclerosis. But such a way of working is not to be despised because it clears away the undergrowth; prevents us wasting both our own and our students' time. The American's most helpful and solid

* See my Writing Matters, Chapter 1, for a detailed discussion of these (St. Clair Press, Sydney, 1981).

achievement is the detailed work they have accumulated showing the (non) relationship between the teaching of formal grammar and improvement in writing ability. The British tradition is looser, less controlled in practice and has at its centre the aim of helping the student to find both his own voice through his language and his cultural 'place' in his society. At its best this tradition uses writing as a means for the student to refine and perhaps change the cultural placement which society and, sadly, schools impose.

I don't want to appear theatrical or over-dramatic but I think that our job as teachers of English is becoming very clear and the central task is an oppositional one. And the reason for this is cultural in the broadest sense. Not so very long ago we could be confident that our role was strictly and precisely professional - to teach about words, combinations of words, sequences of narratives, how to put them together coherently; and about words in books. We had this confidence because the world we inhabited intellectually was closed i.e. we only brought our forensic and analytic skills to bear upon a relatively narrow range of cultural and social centres. Now, with the widespread entrenchment and use of the techniques of cultural anthropology, media sociology, new linguistic analyses of both the deep and surface structures of aspects and corners of our world hitherto hidden, we have been able to pull open the drapes of ideological and deferential language fabrics. Some of these were so opaque that most of us uncritically accepted that the social, political, economic and cultural worlds functioned separately from each other. Now, we know differently and our task is no longer strictly professional but cultural and political in the widest senses.

Our job, obviously, is still to do with words (it's to teach a multi-faceted literacy) but the aim is for wider purposes, to blunt the power of general cultural agencies who use and exploit words in ways which we find abhorrent. I refer to government bureaucracies and the media (both print and technological). These agencies are both our enemies and, paradoxically, our teaching focus because they deny words their intrinsic expression. They refuse to allow density and direction. The words which we try to help our students fashion have resonances and purpose; they are palpable things which we can steer our lives by; they can create hope. Listen to this exchange of words between a twelve year old boy and bureaucractic agent as an example of a cultural power refusing words, turning away from the individual voice.

A. "Dear Sir,

I am writing to you for help which I need badly. I would like to go to Greece, to my mother but my father has not the money to send me. I cannot live up here without my mother. My father trys to help me in anyway he can. But my clothes are dirty I am not fed well there is no one to wash me. I'm only 12 years old I must have my mother without her I cannot live. Please I beg you could you send me to Greece to my mother. I will be very thankful if you help me.

Yours sincerely."

The boy received the following reply:

B. "Dear

I have sent a copy of your letter to the State Department for Community Welfare, which is responsible for the welfare of all children in South Australia, and I have asked that Department to see what help they can offer you.

Someone from that Department will contact you over the next few days, but if you feel that you need to talk about your problems before then, please see your schoolteacher and show her this letter.

Yours sincerely."

The contrast makes its own impact. My point is that there is nothing cruel or arbitrary in the official reply but there is a refusal to recognise sympathetically the boy's plight. "This office cannot assist you in such a matter" immediately places barriers - a monolith evaluates all letters as different kinds of matter! The rest of the letter smoothly shuffles the "problem" aside.

The boy would have received direct and personal help, one suspects, from other agencies but one can imagine the chasm into which his heart would drop on reading that official reply. And the offical writing is a function of cultural sediments which have hardened into attitudes. They represent the far reaches of the business "ethic" where efficiency and processing are criteria for success. People and their dilemmas are reduced to solvable matters to be expedited. The above exchange, I think, is the worldly reflex of that school experience which denies the individual choice, with all its variousness, in favour of statements of disinterested objectivity.

However, it does need to be stressed that the language of "B", as well as lacking sympathetic imagination, does have a consciousness about it, a protective skin, which some would argue is a necessary protection. But the necessity is to ensure the smooth continuation of the rhythms of bureaucracy unhindered by the language of feeling. It is that apparently inviolable necessity that the teaching of English must battle and try to weaken.

Well, that linguistic hopelessness is what we are fighting against, hopefully providing young people with deep words to resound in rage against those empty echoes.

A lighter piece from newspaper narrative, now; but one which points to problems for the ways in which we receive and interpret student narratives.

Three nabbed in rail swoop.

Melbourne - About 40 disguised police swooped on three men yesterday minutes before a $5000,000 consignment of mailbags was loaded at Spencer Street Railway Station.

Two men were intercepted by more than 12 armed police "very close" to the consignment in a goods tunnel.

A third man was surrounded by several police, some wearing bullet-proof vests, as he sat behind the wheel of a station sedan in the station car park. The head of the operation, Superintendent E. Caddle, last night described the arrest as the best planned and most successful police action in recent years. The Spencer Street Station was kept under intensive surveillance for seven days after a "break" in other mailbag robbery investigations.

The drama climaxed at 6.5 p.m. as the mailbags containing large amounts of money, jewellery, travellers cheques and stamps, were about to be taken to the mail van on the Spirit of Progress.

The arrests came 15 days after more than $500,000 in cash, travellers cheques and stamps were taken from 300 mailbags on the same train at Benalla.

Police armed with shotguns and automatic rifles watched the three men arrive at the railway car park at 5.50 p.m.

The station sedan had been parked in the car park next to one of two disguised police vans. Armed detectives had been crouching in the vans since 2 p.m.

One man stepped from the station sedan and urinated on the police van soon after 6 p.m.

Seconds later two men walked from the car park and climbed over a steel security fence and disappeared down the tunnel.

"We had watched a number of dummy runs and we knew tonight was the final operation," Superintendent Caddle said.

"We waited until the last possible moment before Detective Sergeant J. Moxon gave the order to pounce."

Within seconds, about 40 police backed up by 10 special railways investigators simultaneously charged at the three men.

Most of the police wore overalls and T-shirts. Most had been hiding in the two vans - one with the name of a cleaning service painted on the outside - and unmarked cars.

Marked police cars with sirens sounding blocked the exits to the car park as other police escorted two men over an overpass to a waiting car.

The operation was completed in four minutes.

Three men arrested by police gave up without a struggle. No shots were fired. Police took possession of balaclavas and at least two pairs of gloves. Superintendent Caddle described the arrest as the culmination of a massive campaign of security within the railways.*

It is an astonishing piece of code-confusion. As the running string of a surface structure TV script, it is near perfect; but as newspaper reporting, it is a non-starter. Sometimes it is difficult to separate-out reality and the different media versions of reality. This piece suggests that it is difficult for some to separate language. The attempt at the transposition of surface signs-structure from one medium to the dense, reported speech of another is hilarious. It might be salutary as well. Have we, here, a clue to the making of a different kind of re-assessment of those mid-adolescent "free" essays which so painfully detail the current TV fad?

Can you see what I'm trying to do? I'm sidling towards written narratives in education by way of the social and cultural narratives which are ever-present in our own and our students' lives. I want

you to bear with me a bit longer while I make the case more firmly and with greater clarity for the relationship between cultural narratives and personal or private consciousness and its narrative production.

The world has often been compared to the theatre and life to a great drama not dissimilar in kind to those mimetic representations of experience that Thespis is said to have evolved in the Golden Age. The key distinction between this art form and life is that the drama, like play, is a representation or recreation of experience - an imaginative construct. Because the audience is aware that what they are watching is a construct, a fantasy, and not actuality, no matter how much they may be engaged by the work or how genuinely they may respond to it, they are able to remain sufficiently detached from the action to make critical judgements upon it.

It is important to realise that the way an audience in a particular culture makes the distinction between art and everyday life has significant implications for what they expect real life to be like. If these distinctions become blurred people may well become confused as to what may reasonably be expected from life or what the appropriate response to an experience might be. People may well begin to live through images, to need dramatic representations to affirm identity or to provide an acceptable vision of life. I intend to argue later on that these distinctions, which were once so clearly defined, are in the process of breaking down. Public practice is becoming increasingly image-conscious and theatrical, and in consequence private consciousness is also in danger of dramatisation. These changes are occurring because of the daily manipulation of reality at the hands of the mass media.

It is worth noting, too, the collective nature of the dramatic experience. The idea of spectacle is central to drama. There is no play without an audience. With the right rapport between play, players and spectators, a concentration of thought and emotion is possible which can enable the individual to achieve the spiritual insight, the moment of illumination that the Greeks termed "catharsis." (and James Joyce called "an epiphany")

While mentioning spectacle and the importance of the audience to the drama, it is necessary to mention the close links between ritual and drama. Contemporary rituals - the Eucharist, State funerals, a coronation ceremony, the formal opening of Parliament, even rugby matches - all acts of a metaphoric nature, infinitely repeatable and spectacular - all aim at a heightened state of collective consciousness - within whichstate it is possible to re-affirm what it means to belong to our culture. And in recognising the social and cultural importance of the drama one must also recognise its political significance. Drama is an ideological medium which may be used covertly to reinforce certain social codes approved by the dominant class as is easily seen in much T.V. drama and film; or it may be used overtly, as in the plays of Shaw or Brecht or Yeats, to try to force social or political change.

As Williams notes (1975:Ch.3)[1], drama presentations are no longer theatre-bound. Far more dramatic performances take place in cinemas, and on T.V. and radio) and here one must not forget the commercial - that most ubiquitous mini-dramatic form). It is evident that the traditional codes and conventions of drama are being transformed or replaced by the new codes and conventions of the media which are more properly suited to the disembodied nature of performances on film, T.V. and radio.

Theatre performances that were once occasional events are now replaced by the 24 hour drama of the media. Williams is correct when he terms this "a dramatised society". . . . There are two ways of reacting to this definition of society. The first involves that great European commonplace - the notion of life as theatre and the world as a stage. The second involves an exploration of the significance for our culture of a dramatised consciousness - the direct result of the confusion - largely media induced - between history and fiction, reality and fantasy - occuring all the time in our culture.

Language is very much a part of most social and cultural role-play as it is of the individual consciousness. We carry with us into the world the language of the theatre with which we describe our social behaviour. Words such as "tragedy", "act", "performance", "scenario", "public stage" are much overused these days. They are the stock-in-trade of many politicians and media commentators. But more importantly, if this is the way we conceptualise public practice, ultimately this is also the theatrical (and fictionalised) way we view ourselves and define private consciousness. This brings us back to the concept of a dramatised consciousness.

It is not the simple act of over-exposure that is the problem. The real threat lies in the fact that the media "flatten consciousness", (Gitlin, 1972: 345)[2], not just by means of endless repetitions of trivia, but more seriously, either by showing an event and clouding its meaning, or because of their ability to make fantasy <u>seem</u> real so that people may no longer so easily distinguish the illusion from the actual; and further, they may be lulled into an easy acceptance of the fiction, "the spectacle", <u>as</u> the real.

Fruchter notes that "the spectacle attempts to make a total and totally false environment, a pseudo-world ..." (1971)[3] which denies the reality of people's private worlds.

In traditional theatre-based drama it was always clear who was actor and who was spectator, where the play began and ended, what was fiction and what was real. It was possible to detect the links and departure points between the actress, and, say, the tragic heroine she played. Much of the appeal of such theatre has always been the evident created tension between the actor and his stage role. Modern playwrights, such as Pirandello in Six Characters in Search of an Author, make use of the potential of that tension to explore the very nature of illusion and reality. Brecht with "his alienation effect" forces the audience not to "suspend disbelief"; not to accept the illusion, even momentarily, as reality. Brecht wished his audience to remain completely detached and receptive to the ideological meaning of the play.

The very nature of media technology, certainly, and their now well-established production conventions ensure that the reality of all human events is dramatised and mythised almost overnight. One has only to consider the speed with which the 1976 raid on Entebbe was transformed into documentary drama by the ABC and NBC. In this case it was possible for the public memory of the real event to be confused and blurred by two fictional accounts. Whom does the public remember best - the real Israeli Prime Minister at the time or Peter Finch in the NBC version?

A dramatised version of the very recent (May 1980) volcanic eruption of Mount St. Helen's in America is currently in production.

While the story is largely fiction, it does involve a representation of part of the life story of one of the victims of the disaster and the whole is to be backed by actual photographs of the event. This is yet another variation of media manipulation of reality - a blend of fact and fiction.

Not only does the media fictionalise fact in the ways illustrated above they also dramatise news while presenting the product as actuality. Where history is interchangeable with entertainment, truth is defenceless. The media are the creators of a new folk-lore - a modern, electronically disseminated folk-lore. But in the process, the significance of history is negated. We have the TV version of "Holocaust" to recall the horrors of the Warsaw ghetto. "Ike" gives us the "true" account of Eisenhower's war-time experiences. Such manipulations of reality, undertaken not for illumination but for commercial and, one suspects, ideological ends, and the resulting manipulation (or dramatisation) of consciousness which occur constantly and without accountability, pose a grave threat to the maintenance of an authentic private culture in our time.

The likely confusion of fact and fiction in private consciousness is exacerbated by the further media manipulation of reality - the realistic treatment of fantasy - seen daily in films, T.V. "soap operas" and serials. Often TV series claim to depict authentic human experience, to show us how "real people really live". Technologically, they have the capacity to make the illusion seem real (at least on the superficial level), to a far greater extent than stage drama. It is thus the switch back from fantasy to reality that threatens people's private and cultural consciousness. The fact that media drama (in all its forms) is continuous, intimate and ubiquitous is also significant in this context. It is hard to escape from media drama!

"Media drama". Let's turn the argument towards personal dramas, more compelling than those of the media, because authentic. I remind you of Barbara Hardy's tough and withering objectivity:

> "The stories <u>of</u> our days and the stories
> <u>in</u> our days are joined in that autobiography
> we are all engaged in making and re-making
> as long as we live, which we never complete,
> although we all know how it is going to end."
> <u>Tellers and Listeners</u>,[4] (preface).

In general student narratives do not have <u>that</u> kind of calm organisation and distance but most of the 'free' narratives which I've read over the years <u>do</u> have a sense of time and place, elements which, for better or worse, give the writer focus. [By 'free' narrative I include what we call personal or autobiographical narratives, on the one hand, and imaginative narratives on the other. Against these I place functional narratives of the various kinds - formal essays, letters etc.]. These 'free' forms represent what Orwell called, "the making up of a continuous story about myself, a sort of diary existing only in the mind." That last phrase is what I like because student narratives seem to me to be diaries, possessing differing kinds of formal properties and stylistic alignments maybe, but possessing that essential quality of the diary - the opportunity for the reader to get a direct glimpse of what it is like inside the private but just communicable world of other people. [We all keep a diary, few of us write it down].

Let me pin-point this for you more precisely. The following piece, by a ten year old, was written after a reading and discussion of Robert Graves' <u>Welsh Incident</u>.

Student A

> Sleep old Dreamer;
> Fear no more the monsters of the deep;
> No longer do they haunt these shores.
>
> See those jagged rocks yonder
> Battered and worn by the tides?
> There the creatures lie entombed
> Imprisoned for a thousand years.

Condemned by Neptune.
Whose kingly wrath they did provoke
By their misdeeds.
In his mighty fury, he heaved the waves high
Until the ocean seethed and boiled.
But fear no more, all is still,
The monsters are banished.

Rest old Dreamer;
Lulled by eternal grumblings of the sea,
Soothed by the gentle lapping of the waves
And the mermaid's song
Borne on the wind.
Sweet, soft, gentle;
Sleep old Dreamer sleep.

I'm not going to go to absurd lengths and attempt a Jungian analysis but I would argue that Graves' poem has triggered off a felt tension in this ten year old girl (its "objective correlate" doesn't signify). The language is extraordinarily accomplished and too mature to be art-full despite the school-taught archaisms. The first section presents the troubled moment - battered, worn, seething, heaving, boiling, metaphors of God-knows-what compulsive imaginings. There is nothing merely fanciful in the girl's monsters. To write about something you have to identify with it, and you can't identify with what you don't know. The second part presents the calm (and fulfills the main requirement for classical drama - release after crisis). It's nicely done with those lovely iambics,

> "Lulled by eternal grumblings of the sea
> Soothed by the gentle lapping of the waves."

But at the end we are left with a hint of unease. "Sleep Old Dreamer Sleep." is a hope as well as a fulfilment. Overall, if we are truly thinking about this narrative we are getting a glimpse of what it is like inside the private and just communicable world of a little girl.

I want to take a step sideways for a moment to offer a working distinction between speech and writing which is important and which I believe will offer a way forward for the next decade in our classrooms. Spoken language is a social activity directed primarily at maintaining a sense of social reality. We talk to create order out of situations of potential conflict. I have a clear perception of us all, talking our way through the language day, hopping from one set of word clusters to the next, and back again, endlessly. It is a marvellously rich, sap-driving, rasping aural experience. And it is essentially an accommodating and a mediating one. [The very presence of others makes us temper words to faces and feelings].

That central quality of the sociableness of talk is lacking in written, narrative. Writing is an awkward, double-edged capacity for self-awareness and it can either estrange or reconcile us to important realities. Talking means that we are inescapably tied to people and places/personalities in contexts; we re-define the people, re-arrange the contexts at our social peril.

Written 'free' narratives are radically different because we transform, even deform events, situations, people. But the transformations, however dramatic, are authentic ones because they are part of sets of compulsions and virtues which belong uniquely to the writer - the transformations enable the elements of reconciliation or estrangement to which I alluded a few moments ago. Our students' narratives clearly represent that double-edged capacity for they straddle the border-line between explorations of the self (reconciling) and engaging with time, especially the present (potential estrangement).

I suppose that the real skill with narrative i.e. that property which allows for the development of many perspectives is the ability to manipulate all time, not just the present. And it is this skill which will provide our children and our youth with weapons to withstand the time-consuming nature of media, especially the electronic kind. There is one aspect of the relationship between time and media which is very important for the practice of narrative and that is the way in which the electronic media, in particular, consume time-past; they obliterate memory. A true awareness of time, because within it events are remembered and reflected upon, is activated in the present, yes, but re-calling all time, all [private and/or imagined] life. Put more directly the tenses of our language's grammar allow us to articulate the tensions of experience. In personal and in imaginative narratives we defy the loss of the present; out of the glimpses and the transformations of last year and the year before lie the reassurances of survival.

I'll try to make this a bit more concrete by making reference to a time-obsessed writer - Proust. In his great work Proust feels a compulsion to bring past subjects and parts of himself to life and he claims that creating a narrative is the only way to do this. When he describes the moments of awakening memory he becomes aware of that which is timeless in himself. Those lost things, "time regained", is a private world regained.

The final general point I wish to make, and that is the acceptance of despair and ugliness in our students' narratives. I have two reasons. Firstly, there seems to be a great deal of the commodities about in student writing. Let me qualify that.

There seems to be a disproportionate amount in imaginative narratives of mid and older teenagers. Some recent work by one of my students working with 15-16 year old boys, encouraging imaginative narrative, showed that of 118 themes in their texts 55 were about violence, drugs, alcoholism, crime, war, social disharmony of various kinds; only 10 featured friendship, or success or sincerity in relationships, for example. This is hardly a surprise given the nature of the world and, more to the point, the crude and melodramatic ways the media present the world to their audiences. Many T.V. and film offerings have transformed rape and mayhem into the status of conventional greetings!

The second reason for accepting the dark side of the human psyche in student narrative is that, paradoxically, it offers the possibility of hope, which I mentioned earlier. The reason for this is that, despite the apparent obsession with destruction and closed, brittle humanity, beneath the surface is a sense of astonishment. Adolescent narratives of violence are themselves shocked expressions of the world which we adults offer them. And even that disturbance (because it is alive and tough) is better than the sentimental and facile pap which all media churn out in the name of freedom. For the young, I believe, narrative allows two things. It allows him to uncover a voice which might say clearly what he <u>is</u>; secondly, having recognized the self, more controlled narratives might enable him to <u>become</u> in the context of his community - another double reconciliation, of relationship and inwardness.

For general culture in the community, widespread and long-term encouragement of the production of written narrative will help the development of social tolerance because as the tensions of the self are resolved in the context of a more fully comprehended world, then some requirements of human freedom are ratified - that, in the reception of the individual's narratives audiences will not be required to, say, suspend disbelief or to make formal judgements but merely to accept that a writer is writing and that the product could be written differently; that the meanings produced in narrative can be changed by a new thought or by someone else's meaning or by new experience. That kind of language freedom can be guaranteed by the life of words shouting their own kinds of astonishment into the unyielding surfaces of life; life which daily is being narrowed and confined by the mildewed stereotypes of the media.

Peter Moss
University of Adelaide

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